



THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN TRANSFORMING INDIA'S ARTISAN ECONOMY WITH REFERENCES TO WOMEN EQUITY

Dr. Mithilesh Kumar

Ph. D. VKSU. Ara. Bihar.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Mithilesh Kumar

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Abstract:

Women suffer from acute time-poverty as they squeeze in time to weave a basket or a stole while juggling multiple domestic roles and responsibilities. Household chores and caregiving remain the exclusive domain of women, with men contributing little to nothing. "In most cases, since craft is a household activity, they don't even get paid," says Payal Nath of Kadam. Talent notwithstanding, in volatile geographies like craft-rich Kashmir, women are discouraged from pursuing entrepreneurship despite being highly qualified since this would mean stepping out amidst political strife. Eventually, when women run out of choices and turn to craft, they are relegated to the sidelines. Inshada Bashir is an exception. A grantee of Commitment to Kashmir, she received the resources and support needed to employ 40 artisans, most of whom are women. They went from earning Rs.250 a day to Rs. 400 a day. While her father initially had reservations, he now supports her. As for Inshada, she is no longer dependent on her father and dreams of setting up an enterprise and employing more women.

Introduction:

The female adult literacy rate in rural India is only 50.6% (MOSPI, 2016)

- Social taboos like caste get in the way of building strong, cohesive teams
- Gender bias in traditionally male-dominant cottage industries serve as impediments to a more inclusive employment and livelihoods programme
- Men and women being offered equal pay isn't well received by some communities

- Work that is done outside household chores is met with great suspicion in certain parts of India. They need to explain to their men why they go out for 2-3 hours daily or assemble in a community centre, especially for training or production. The expectation is also that if you're away for X number of hours, the take-home will be X x 100 rupees," shares Nath
- A lack of agency or say in pursuing craft or any activity as a career hurts most women

Challenge:

Project Tres helps women in India Kenya on their way to economic and personal independence. We provide handcraft training and educate our women to become independent entrepreneurs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many of our mothers' families lost the sources of income they had outside of Project Tres, making our organization the only source of income and support. Our previous five years of hard work have been negatively impacted by COVID-19, undermining their progress and development.

1. The 'New Formal' is the new normal:

We posit that the 'New Formal' is an emergent hybrid approach that effectively marries best practices of the 'informal' [cultural networks, behaviours and the 'formal' [social protection,(8) data, mobility(9)] in India's artisan economy. It is a dynamic continuum; informal modes of work among rural creative cultures inform business models of creative enterprises who adapt to local contexts to drive productivity, profits, and innovation. This formal-informal interplay has the potential to drive a more equitable and inclusive dialogue between diverse stakeholders across functions.

2. Misunderstood and under mapped:

The informal nature of India's artisan sector is not one of its own doing or choosing. Perception bias against

handmade inhibits accurate and context specific data collection, relegating it further into informality. State apathy too, for instance, comes through in the absence of reliable figures on how many artisans or craft-based enterprises operate in this sector. Asymmetric data inhibits artisan and MSME access to global-local networks, marketplaces, service providers, and investors, further impacting their growth and scalability; this also impairs engagement by institutional actors in critical areas such as infrastructure, credit, education, and market access. Moreover, in India, informality and exclusion cannot be understood without delving into issues of caste, religion, community, or gender. Such data is vital to designing impact strategies.

3. One size does not fit all:

Given the myriad political, socio-cultural, linguistic, and historical realities in India, a one size approach cannot cater to the diverse needs and requirements of diverse artisan enterprises. This applies to policies and interventions aimed at both informal artisan communities and formal enterprises working in the artisan sector. Market-based solutions do not recognise that craft production cycles are unique and seasonal, often part-time, rural and decentralised, women-led and creativity-based; unlike assembly line manufacturing models. A standard cookie-cutter approach only serves to perpetuate systemic bias

without addressing the true aspirations and needs of rural communities.

4. Challenges of language, discourse, and knowledge:

Conversations around informality and creative economies, rooted in Global North contexts, pose barriers to organic inclusion of differently organised, creative cultures and craft-led enterprises. Enterprises and entrepreneurial artisan communities lack access to business and sustainability 'speak'. When formal institutions break down language barriers to knowledge, greater inclusion and credible participation is achieved. In a country that boasts of 19,500 mother tongues and 22 official languages, linguistic diversity is still not accommodated in business, policy, and education. To engineer systemic reform, the artisan economy must be seen as a site of agency and empowered with sector-specific policy support to achieve their true potential.

5. Decentralisation enables inclusion and scale:

Enterprises in the artisan sector are differently motivated and cannot be reverse engineered to meet traditional definitions of growth; scale is definitely possible but is achieved via decentralised collectivisation. For example, true inclusion of women in the workforce cannot happen without acknowledging that much of their labour within the artisan sector (and otherwise) remains invisible. The

decentralised approach significantly lowers entry barriers for differently skilled communities; especially women. As Judy Frater puts it so eloquently, "Because commercialisation of craft has been based on an industrial model, the assumption is that craft must scale up to succeed. But when craft is pushed into the world of industrialised production, the structure of artisan societies inevitably changes from horizontal to vertical. Economically stronger individuals become "Master Artisans," employ previously equal status artisans as workers, and gain higher social as well as economic status. The perception of the artisan as a worker is thus reinforced in a new, socially threatening form." (Business of Handmade 2021: 47)

6. Craft-led enterprises drive sustainability:

The ethos of craft-based production is clearly pro-nature and pro-people. The artisan economy has an innate ability to drive socioeconomic mobility, conscious production, and mindful consumption. Besides using naturally available local resources, many enterprises are embedding circular and renewable strategies i.e. upcycling, responsible sourcing etc., and are open to forming alliances that revive indigenous crops and materials for an integrated farm-to-product value chain. Localised craft-based supply chains drive shared values, collective learning, and self-sustaining lifestyles. The

artisan economy creates jobs for communities that are differently-skilled, low-literate, differently-abled, and traditionally marginalised.

Solution:

Challenges that have plagued the sector for many decades, often rooted in informality, have come to the fore during COVID-19. Suspension of in-person exhibitions and craft bazaars, during both waves, caused many artisans and enterprises to shut shop and scale down. But it has also facilitated an opportunity for transformation. The informal nature of craft-based work has helped many enterprises and their artisans to continue operations, validating work-from-home models indigenous to the artisan economy. It has also incentivised the accelerated shift to digital. Craft in India is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of intangible cultural heritage. Unlike “tangible” cultural heritage which includes monuments, artefacts, books, works of art, etc., which can be seen and touched, “intangible” heritage such as folklore, language, traditions, music, and knowledge need to be experienced. In an increasingly globalised world, where the attention economy is measured in clicks and time spent, there are significant challenges to the survival of traditional forms of craftsmanship. It is easier to fight for something you can see is in danger, for example, a beloved monument at risk of

being torn down or the loss of a forest or lake as opposed to safeguarding the unseen skills and knowledge involved in craftsmanship.

Materials and Methods:

They help in broadening their horizons, resulting in a domino effect of women continuing to invest in their families and communities. With their newfound financial independence, they command more respect within their families and communities, are able to afford better education for their children, and no longer want to get them married young, having seen the benefits of being able to stand on their own feet. They are also empowered to participate in decision making when it comes to their villages, bringing in solutions that will benefit the community at large, be it building of libraries, schools, or investing in solar-powered electricity. difference between what is right and what isn't. She will also be able to pass on the legacy to her next generation. Equal opportunities in all sectors should be provided to them. Even now we see few sectors consider only men to hold the top positions. Recently even the Indian Army included females to appear for SSB interviews which were till now limited to only male aspirants. We can look up to the Indian Army for taking inspiration.

The abuse of single women and divorced ones should be considered as a society's issue and should be tried to

solve rather than blaming the women. Even now, women fear to leave a failed marriage.

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approaches that the artisan ecosystem anchors cannot have a one-size-fits-all pathway. For example, in Kashmir the infrastructure needed to support artisan communities and artisan-entrepreneurs is very different from what is needed in the states of Gujarat or Karnataka, and current approaches that exist account for this diversity.

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